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## **Migration in far West Nepal. Challenging migration categories and theoretical lenses**

Poertner, E ; Junginger, M ; Müller-Böker, U

**Abstract:** In this reply to Ronald Skeldon's comment on their article, "Migration in Far West Nepal" (Critical Asian Studies 43 (1) 2011), the authors stress the need to overcome the categorical dichotomy between "international" and "internal" migration by thoroughly considering the conditions and characteristics different types of cross-border regimes encompass for migrants. They furthermore argue that choosing the "right" theoretical approach or conceptual framework depends on the kinds of research questions that need to be answered. By understanding migration as a social practice, the authors favor a multi-dimensional approach to migration, one that does not place economic motives over others. Ultimately, they call for a reconciliation of different—competing—perspectives on migration.

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Exchange  
**Migration in Far West Nepal**  
**Challenging Migration Categories and Theoretical Lenses**

Ephraim Poertner, Mathias Junginger, and Ulrike Müller-Böker

**ABSTRACT:** In their reply to Ronald Skeldon's comment, published in *Critical Asian Studies* 43(2), "Migration in Far West Nepal," the authors emphasize to overcome the categorical dichotomy between "international" and "internal" migration by thoroughly considering the conditions and characteristics different types of cross-border regimes encompass for migrants. They furthermore argue that the decision of choosing the "right" theoretical approach or conceptual framework is dependent on what kind of research questions shall be answered. By understanding migration as a social practice, they favour a multi-dimensional approach to migration, which does not favour economic motives over others. Ultimately, they call for a reconciliation of different – competing – perspectives on migration.

In his comment "Migration in Far West Nepal: Reflections on Movements in and from the Region", which appeared in *Critical Asian Studies* 44 (2) 2011: 310-315, Ronald Skeldon reviews and also criticizes some aspects of our article "Migration in Far West Nepal: Inter-generational Linkages between Internal and International Migration of Rural-to-Urban Migrants", published in *Critical Asian Studies* 43 (1) 2011: 23-47. We would like to reply to the two main arguments in his comment: firstly, on the categorization of migration, and in particular, the distinction between international migration and internal migration in the case of Far West Nepal and India; and secondly, the challenge of the "Bourdieu social practice" conceptual framework we employed in our article.

**On migration categories**

Skeldon questions "...how 'international' the migration from the region is and the extent to which it is clearly distinct from 'internal' migration. (...) To what extent is it meaningful to talk of international migration in the context of the importance of propinquity and an open border?"<sup>1</sup> We agree, there is an open border agreement between Nepal and India; and, certainly, there is a difference between migration across borders without any passport or visa requirements from those that do have restrictions, but this does not mean that the character of the migration is not decidedly international. Likewise, in the Schengen area<sup>2</sup>, few people would assume that migration within this area is tantamount to "internal" migration. And we do not share the claim that "de facto, if not de jure, movements to India are extensions of internal systems of mobility".<sup>3</sup> Empirical evidence clearly points to the fact that Nepali migrants find it crucial to distinguish between internal migration and the migration to neighbouring India. Besides slight but existing differences in "culture", national identity is more important from the perspective of the migrants. India is "othered" and frequently portrayed as an uneven partner, exploiting Nepal as a regional hegemonic power. The fact that some former labour migrants of the case study decided to return to Nepal to make a "Nepalese" education possible for their children indicates that even in Far West Nepal a sense of belonging to Nepal is pronounced. Moreover, many respondents stress the difficulties and irritation Nepali migrants face in India, because of their nationality.

However, the general issue raised by the question of how "international" a migration is ulti-

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<sup>1</sup> Skeldon 2011, 312.

<sup>2</sup> The Schengen area and cooperation are founded on the Schengen Agreement of 1985 and was incorporated in the framework of the European Union (EU) in 1999. "The Schengen area represents a territory where the free movement of persons is guaranteed. The signatory states to the agreement have abolished all internal borders in lieu of a single external border." (See [http://europa.eu/documentation/legislation/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/documentation/legislation/index_en.htm) "Schengen Agreement").

<sup>3</sup> Skeldon 2011, 312.

mately regarded, does not end here. Manifold types of migration regimes across international borders currently exist, for instance regimes that are quite different for crossing borders from the “developing” to the “developed” countries than between “developed” countries, or even varying regimes for different categories of migrants such as high-skilled or low-skilled migrants. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of thoroughly observing the conditions and characteristics different types of cross-border regimes encompass for the migrants rather than sticking too much to the mere categories of “international” and “internal”.

Historically, India has been the prime destination for international labour migrants of Nepal. The trend to migrate to other destinations, particularly to the Gulf States emerged in the last decade. The number of Gulf migrants, however, remained relatively small (184,000 in 2004/2005) compared to the number of Nepali migrants estimated in India (ranging from 0.8 million up to 2.5 million).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, enormous regional differences exist within Nepal in regard to these “new” destinations: while about 45 percent of the migrants from Nepal’s Eastern Development Region migrate to destinations other than India, only one percent of migrants from the Far Western Development Region (where the case study was conducted) did so.<sup>5</sup> Thus, India is certainly not the only destination for international migrants of Nepal, but for the region of consideration is (still), by far, the most important one.

### On theoretical lenses

Skeldon argues that in our employment of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice “... a clear difference between cultural and social capital seems elusive”.<sup>6</sup> To recapitulate, according to Bourdieu “[c]ultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (...); and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee” (Bourdieu 1986, 47; and “[s]ocial capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to ... membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital (...)”.<sup>7</sup>

Since Bourdieu subsumes education qualifications clearly under cultural capital, we suggest that the author does not charge us for including “education ...under cultural capital even though the education system will have been introduced by the central government far to the east of Bajhang and will promote values quite distinct from those of local cultures”.<sup>8</sup> A closer reading of Bourdieu would have revealed that despite the true assumption that “[e]ducational qualifications provide the recipients with the means to move from the local to the regional”,<sup>9</sup> these locally or regionally acquired qualifications always qualify as *cultural* capital in the Bourdieuan sense of the term. Yet, cultural capital is transferrable into social capital, for instance it might open up membership in a group of teachers or government employees, which share a distinct “taste” of moving to lowland cities to educate their children.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Skeldon states that “[a] question mark must lie over the usefulness of the social practice framework to provide a robust theory for this migration in Nepal. The detailed discussions of the migration seem but tenuously linked to the theory and, where attempts are made, the results seem contradictory”.<sup>11</sup> The detailed discussion is intentionally not more conceptual, since the article is primarily of an empirical and not a conceptual nature. In other

<sup>4</sup> NIDS 2007, 7-8; NIDS 2010, 37-38.

<sup>5</sup> Kansakar 2003, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Skeldon 2011, 312.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu 1986, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Skeldon 2011, 312-313.

<sup>9</sup> Skeldon 2011, 313.

<sup>10</sup> See also Bourdieu 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Skeldon 2011, 313.

words, neither did we claim to resolve the competing and fragmented theoretical viewpoints, which migration studies admittedly struggle with<sup>12</sup>, nor to address the “dichotomy ... between French approaches to social theory and Anglo-Saxon approaches ...”.<sup>13</sup> We attempted, however, to exemplify the usefulness of applying a social practice framework by pointing throughout the article to a possible theoretical reading of our findings.<sup>14</sup> We are aware that this is an ambitious and sometimes rocky undertaking, with a readership more or less familiar with Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice.

Instead, Skeldon advocates the new economics of migration approach as “a more useful conceptual framework for the analysis the migration in Far West Nepal”.<sup>15</sup> We deem the decision of choosing the “right” theoretical approach or conceptual framework to be dependent on what kind of research questions shall be answered. By understanding migration as a social practice, we avoid a one-dimensional approach to the motives of migration, which are manifold and in our reading connected to the habitus (the dispositions, experiences) as well as the social fields (the social context) of the migrants. Accordingly, we do not favour economic motives over other motives, be they political, related to status etc. In contrary to this, the new economics of migration approach tends to emphasise the economic side of migration, by seeing migration as a way of tapping new resource niches for households and to diversify their risks in the absence of a (functioning) insurance market.<sup>16</sup>

We therefore appreciate the reference to links of our subject matter to this field of study and see its potential for future research. However, the simple reason why “[v]ery little is made of this [new economics of migration] literature”<sup>17</sup> indeed, is because it clings to a micro-level perspective<sup>18</sup> we precisely attempted to overcome. And, if we opened up the floor for a broader discussion of our findings by introducing different migration approaches, references to the abundant literature on transnational migration as well as to migration networks/systems theory would have been sought after for their potential additional insights.<sup>19</sup>

We would like to emphasize that the circumstance that migration phenomena are not researched from a shared paradigm but from many different disciplinary traditions and viewpoints bears at the same time a strength and weakness: a strength because the different viewpoints ultimately add up to a detailed, multi-dimensional picture of migration; and, a weakness because the different viewpoints tend to be played off against each other rather than being perceived as complementary.<sup>20</sup> This ultimately calls attention to the importance of a mutual understanding of distinct perspectives on migration, which we hope that we contributed to through this exchange.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Massey et al. 1994, 700.

<sup>13</sup> Skeldon 2011, 315.

<sup>14</sup> The application of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice has been suggested by different authors (De Haan and Zoomers 2005; Dörfler, Graefe, and Müller-Mahn 2003; Herzig and Thieme 2007; Thieme 2006, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Skeldon 2011, 313.

<sup>16</sup> Castles & Miller 2009, 24; Massey et al. 1993, 436.

<sup>17</sup> Skeldon 2011, 313.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Massey et al. 1993, 440.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Castles & Miller 2009, 27-33.

<sup>20</sup> In line with Massey et al. 1993.

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